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INTERVIEW WITH ROSE DWIGHT

by Dr. Joseph Watras

September 25, 1990

JW: I'm talking to Rose Dwight, who was involved in the Center City School. You sent your daughter to Center City School, didn't you?

RD: The first daughter went the first year it opened. We moved here from Eugene, Oregon and moved right into this neighborhood on Cornell Ave. in an apartment building and Megan went to Fairport Elementary School. That was the first year of individually guided education in Dayton. Megan was a smart little child so they put her in with a wide range of kids. We'd come from a very all-white, middle-class community and she moved in with kids from Kindergarten through eighth grade in that building, teachers who had very few hours of instruction on how you do individually guided education. So Megan is quickly tested and because she has known how to read since she was 3, they put her in a group of 2nd and 3rd graders. She became really anxious, although she was a big girl and a tough kid - mean as a snake little girl. She would come home so upset that she would have stomachaches and would throw up. She would just womp her little sister who was 3 at the time, just beat her to death! Just sort of mounted, the tension did. School started the first of September and by the middle of October we really had a really nervous little kid on our hands. So we took her to the pediatrician and he said that there is nothing wrong with her. It's just a nervous stomach. She'll just have to learn with her

situation. So Bob was just out of graduate school and so Sunday at school I said to Ruth Price at Christ Church, "Ruth, I need to find a child psychologist for Megan. She's really not doing well." She said, "What's wrong?" So I explained the story about this nervous stomach. And she said, "Why don't you come to Center City?" I said, "Ruth, we couldn't possibly do that; my mother is still paying the rent." She said, "Don't worry. I'll take care of it." She happened to be the chairperson of the scholarship committee. So that was on Sunday. The next morning I brought Megan to Center City School. By that Friday, that child was a new person. It was just the most incredible turn-around in a child's life that I had ever known.

JW: Now that was in 1972?

RD: 1971. School had just started.

JW: There were only 30-some kids there?

RD: Yes, and Megan was one of those kids. So we were in on that beginning of that thing. Her teacher was a woman whose name is Edna Nelson.

JW: Oh, she was the black lady...

RD: Yes. Megan thought she had been...I guess one of the things that might be important to tell you is that Megan is this - we used to call her a freaky little kid. She's just a little wiry, blond, kind of all elbows. Just as bright as she could be. She taught herself to read when she was just 3 years old. And was just essentially a really...We have a picture of her with her hands on her hips and she's stomping her right foot saying, "I can do it by myself." I always tease her now because she is such a

pleasant person. I said, "God, if you could have figured out how to have changed your diapers, you would have done that!" She was a difficult child to deal with because she was so independent. I found her a real headache to be her mother. I guess that is the real reason why Center City is so incredibly special to me. Because my sense is that it focused all of that desire to be so independent into a real productive kind of thing. She used to say repeatedly, "Why aren't you fair like Mrs. Nelson and why don't you do this like Mrs. Nelson!" It was just the most incredible transformation of a child. I would say prior to Megan being in that class, there were few days of peace in my life as her mother and I would say since that first day at Center City, Megan has probably worried me or troubled me or I've been concerned about her a total of 10 days. She's 25 and a half years old. I credit Center City with everything that Megan is.

JW: Since you enrolled your daughter in Center City you also had to volunteer some 20 hours a month?

RD: I don't remember that there was any kind of time like that set down. I was so intrigued by the place, I couldn't stay away. I probably maybe spent more time there than any other parent.

JW: Was that as a teacher's aide?

RD: I did anything. No secretarial work. I did all kinds of things. I'd get libraries together. I essentially did anything that Lois needed to be done. Sort papers, cut papers, a thing that an aide would do to free up the teacher. And she always knew - I guess because I was so

fascinated - I had never seen that kind of education happen - that she just knew that I was on call and I would come and do anything.

JW: It wasn't exactly individually guided but it was an open education.....the city as a resource.

RD: That was the thing. I could just tell you stories that I think are marvelous. When I later learned I think is the major term, the British Primary System, theme teaching. Because those classes were small, it would be like the world at work. So all of the classes, art, any kind of language, English, math, would all revolve around that topic of the world at work. And they would do that for either a long quarter, I think that one lasted a whole semester, and then we moved into the world of leisure. It was just done in a most creative kind of way. Because they were small, they could pick up and go anyplace. They'd go to the courts, they'd go down to the river, you could just see a little band of kids going someplace all the time. They went to the library. In fact, there is a woman at the Dayton Public Library whose name is Nancy, is all I know, and Nancy still remembers all those little Center City kids just trouping down there. Megan has been through college. She's in her third year of medical school.

JW: Well, they closed in 1980, I guess. Lois Hyman left and there was a headmaster for a short while and then Bob Hoover I guess...

RD: I told you on the phone that my sense of Mr. Hoover was that he was a wonderful grandfather. As a forty-year-old woman, I wanted to crawl up on his lap. He was just

emanated that, "Oh, I could take care of any emotional need you would have." That school, to me, had - and the reason that I was willing to make the personal sacrifices financially that we were willing to do - was because of the creativity. And he was absolutely void of creativity. He didn't understand that concept at all. One of the things that I sensed that Lois knew how to do was to nurture a band of very young teachers. And really encourage them and they were so pliable as they would come out of school, she just knew how to really encourage them and they seemed to be more open to that kind of teaching of what she had in mind. I don't know if she introduced that method or if the board who created Center City had that kind of idea, my sense is that it was all her idea.

JW: The original statement of purpose mentions that it is a Christian School. But then in the descriptions of the curriculum I can't find much religion.

RD: Absolutely none.

JW: I find it described as mild septarian.

RD: Yes. The first student that enrolled was Jewish girl. Carlin Notley was the first student that enrolled. Her mother is an art teacher in the Dayton school system. I don't know, but I just know that she always prides herself as being the first student that ever enrolled. The family lives right by the seminary.

JW: They didn't teach religion?

RD: No. The kids would, because they would traipse through that building, may have been curious, but my sense is that religion was taught in the way that they would

teach religion in college. They did a thing on world religions, as I remember.

JW: They compared religions?

RD: Yes, that kind of thing.

JW: They didn't teach faith, they compared...

RD: That's exactly right.

JW: Did Reverend Price play a strong role in the school? I have a feeling, just looking at the records, that he would be on the board of directors and he would have been involved in the financial aspect.

RD: Yes, financial. Gordon Price was a person in this community who was just loved. He knew how to tap paper for money. He could just get blood out of a turnip. He was just the most amazing fundraiser. People were just so used to seeing this white-haired guy going up and down the street. He was just a well-known person. Because he'd always been for the city, been on the school board...

JW: He was white-haired then?

RD: Yes, he's had a lot of white hair for a long time. He would just say, "David Rike," or whatever and he'd hit them up for a thousand dollars. He didn't want 25 cents for a cup of coffee; he wanted a thousand! He was the fundraiser. It was just Gordon's presence in the community that people just gave it to him. The only other part that Gordon really played was - Gordon is the friendliest person also in town - and he would often stand down when the kids would come in the morning and he would greet them. He's such a big old burly man...

JW: He is tall.

RD: He is. Actually, for the church school kids who came there on Sunday, one of the things was that there was a certain mark on his body that he could lift you and throw you in the air and when you got beyond that mark, he couldn't do it anymore. But the kids really responded to his affection. That would be the way that he would contribute. I know when we decided that I couldn't pay that kind of money to Mr. Hoover, with Mr. Hoover as the...it just killed me to tell Gordon that we were leaving. I cried for weeks. Because I just knew what this meant to him. And to tell him that I was leaving really upset me.

JW: When he set up the school, his idea seems to have been to show that integration racially, economically and socially could work in the Center City. But the strength of the school that you seem to be saying is somewhat different; it was more creative, more individualistic than it is that multi-cultural setting. Two separate ideals that were the role of the school.

RD: My sense is that if you have one, you have the other. Because people were so engaged in that creative process and because Lois was so fair, I can't tell you - we would have these Lois assemblies - she just thought it was so important to have these show-and-tell times and she would just drag these parents in all the time.

JW: She did a newspaper?

RD: Oh, she did everything! My sense often in the public school, if you find two kids that have a lot of ability to be up front and have a lot of presence, you just continue to give them more experience. And the little shy people, they just continue being shy. Not Lois.

JW: Oh, she involved everybody?

RD: Everybody did it. No one got to take a back seat. I don't care what it was. There was this fairness about that. These things were always done with psalms, with art. It was just sort of an experience that she would just create. The teachers were just willing to go along with a lot of fun, foolishness kinds of things. My sense is that you could never see a school teacher come dressed up like Rudolph, the Red-nosed Reindeer, with the little red nose and hopping around and doing a song with little kids.

JW: But that's what went on at Center City?

RD: That's what went on. There was just a sense of fun that people would be just drawn in. Class didn't matter.

JW: You mean times weren't set?

RD: I mean economic class or color, none of those things seemed to matter. We were just together and no one thought about it.

JW: Since I made the misunderstanding, that does bring up another interesting question and that was about the schedule of the day. That was fairly set, wasn't it?

RD: My sense is that Lois was one of those people that really - she had a structure, and it was flexible. It was that kind of person. I'm just remembering my own education

classes, you have your set lesson plan, but then you can also throw it out the window. My sense was that Lois had the day structured. There were time periods - it wasn't one of those Summerhill free schools that we would go play with Play-doh all day; we moved right along and she was very task-oriented.

JW: There weren't _____ were there?

RD: No. I have no memory of how they went from class...They mainly stayed...

JW: ...second floor there is not much space. There are pictures of kids climbing in that little atrium where the sculptures are. It looked awfully small.

RD: It was. The recess room was downstairs. I don't know if anyone took you down there. The recess room is a large room that's in the basement. That's where the homeless spend the day now. It's called the "Other Place." It's kind of a large, concrete room.

JW: So they didn't have a gymnasium.

RD: Right. Because the kids were free to go for walks. I never had any feeling that Megan, and later Carson, felt confined to quarters.

JW: They weren't free to go off by themselves.

RD: No, but I mean that if things felt tight, the teacher was free to go walk around the block. You didn't have to have 12 permission slips and find bus fare for everybody. You just get up and walk around the block.

JW: How did they work insurance?

RD: I don't have any idea.

JW: That's usually what prevents the public schools from doing all that stuff. I would imagine Lois Hyman worked very hard. I know that she was flexible, but she must have been diligent.

RD: I have no memory of her ever looking stressed out for one second. She just gave this sort of air that, "It's no problem. I know what I'm doing." She never looked harassed or harried; was always calm and you could get her on the phone like that. She was always available.

JW: When Center City began, it began with the idea of showing people in the public schools that integrated education in the center city could work. It was supposed to be an example. At least that's what several of the documents said. Did it have such an effect?

RD: I guess the only thing that I could say is how I see my own child living that out now. I just recall how well those kids got along. It seemed as though color was blind. There was this young guy, and I had just heard from his sister about a month ago. His name is Steven Bush. He was the cutest young guy you have ever seen, a young black guy. He just had this vitality about him that you just wanted to squeeze him because he was so cute. At the end of the assemblies he would just stand up there and bow. He just knew he was the cutest thing in there. He just tickled me to death! There was that sense of a community.

JW: When Gordon Price suggested setting up the school, he talked to the then city manager about doing it. The city manager said that it was a good idea. One thing that it would do would be to help keep young executives in the city.

They would send their children for quality education at a quality school. Did it have that effect? Did it seem to bring children of executives to the center of the city?

RD: I don't really know. My sense is that there were children of professionals. Actually, one family that came down from Piqua was the guy who owned the Ora-Felton Mills and these were his stepchildren. A girl Friday, or a woman Friday, or whatever you call it, brought those kids down here every day. Those are kids that had just moved here from New York City. It was a new marriage. I really couldn't believe it. But they did! She would pull up in her little station wagon every morning. And these little kids came in just the wealthiest kids in the world. They were just like everybody else. There was a really gallatarian thing there.

JW: It was fairly small. You had mentioned there were 30-something when it began and I guess it never got past 120. So it really couldn't have made a big debt on public education, for example.

RD: No.

JW: But it certainly had a lot of publicity.

RD: It did.

JW: Somebody had a lot of bag for the buck.

RD: I don't know whether that was just on the coattails of Gordon's personality or not. I think that probably had a lot to do with it. And also because at the time to see all these little children all over the downtown, we didn't have at that time all the nurseries we have downtown. We didn't have the kids over at the Baptist

Church; we didn't see all those kids who are downtown. So that would be my sense, is that they got a lot of attention because it was so unusual to see so many children. Because during that time that Lois was there, the themes that they picked up on, because they did a thing on law, so they were in the courts...

JW: There's a picture of them in the judge's chambers.

RD: Yes, and so they just hit every corner of the city and so I'm sure they did get a number of people's attention.

JW: It was really an exciting time and something we should celebrate.

RD: It really was. Let me just tell you one little thing that happened. Megan is now in the middle of her third year of medical school, but in the summer and just a little bit prior, well actually at the end of May and all through June she was finished up her second year but getting ready for what we called "National Boards." Every medical student takes this. She was really overwhelmed with the amount of work, but she said she got her little schedule all together and said she really knew how to do it. She learned to do that in the third grade at Center City. One day, Megan came home - They had done a little bit of contract teaching with kids up to that point, but not so much until she was in the third grade. Megan loved school and when she would come home at night, she would get all those stuffed animals out and she would teach for 2 hours every night. Every night in the basement over on Euclid, she'd have all her people down there and she would work all night. She just couldn't let that go. This one night she came home in

the third grade and she was just bursting with frustration. I said, "Megan, what's wrong?" She said, "I have all this work to do and I don't know how I'm going to do it!" I said, "What are you talking about?" She said, "I'm supposed to do all this stuff and I don't know how you do that!" I said, "Megan, neither do I. Just calm down. We'll call Mrs. Hyman in the morning." Megan went off the school in the car pool and I called Lois and I said, "Lois, Megan does not understand this concept. Will you help her?" "Sure will." She went to Megan and got her out of her class and took her in her office and she said, "You come on down and I'll show you how we do it." I got there in an hour and she had already spent 45 minutes with Megan by that time. Megan totally understood the concept of how you figure out your whole body of work and how you do these increments to get it done by that time. To this day Megan was a National Merit Scholar, she was the valedictorian at Colonel White. She learned. She laughed the other day when I had said, "Well, Megan, how are you going to get a handle on all of this?" And she said, "Mrs. Hyman taught me."

JW: That is cute. RD: Well, I want to thank you for spending this time with me.

RD: Well, you're welcome. Sometime it would be fun for you to just - I'd love for you to meet Megan and see how this experience still colors her life. She is a really product of what creativity is all about.

JW: I'd like to meet her. Thank you.